NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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THE LOST BANK PRESIDENT

—OR— NICK CARTER TAKES A GREAT BIG CHANCE

"BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

With white but sullen faces, Hermia and her maid watched Nick unlock the bags. The game was up now, for as he threw the cases open both seemed to be literally crammed with money.

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NICK CARTER TAKES A GREAT BIG CHANCE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE LOST BANK PRESIDENT.

Nick Carter reached out his right hand and drew the telephone toward him. Having placed the receiver against his ear, he called out:

"Well? What is it?"

"I would like to speak to Mr. Nicholas Carter," came the response over the wire.

"You are doing that now. I am Mr. Carter. Who are you?"

"I am Henry Horton, of the Tudor Trust Company. Are you very busy this morning, Mr. Carter?"

"Not particularly."

"Do you think you could spare the time to come here and see me—at once? It is a very grave matter—at least it seems so to me—a matter of grave importance."

"Are you at the trust company offices now, Mr. Horton?" asked the detective.

"Yes; corner of Fifth Avenue and——"

"I know where it is."

"I don't like to tell you over the wire why I wish to see you, Mr. Carter, but if you could make it convenient to come here as soon as possible, I should greatly appreciate it."

"I will be there inside half an hour, Mr. Horton."

"Thank you."

And so it was that at half-past ten o'clock that Wednesday morning, Nick Carter was ushered into the private office of the Tudor Trust Company, where he found Mr. Henry Horton alone awaiting him.

"Be seated, Mr. Carter," he said. "It was good of you to come so promptly. I have never had the pleasure of meeting you before, but all the same your name and reputation are well known to me. That is why I have turned to you in my trouble."

"What is the trouble, Mr. Horton?" asked Nick.

"The trouble, in a word, is this: Yesterday afternoon, at one o'clock, our president, Mr. Hiram Bolton, disappeared. This morning I find that eight hundred thousand dollars in cash—in currency, in fact—disappeared with him."

Nick was silent a moment. Then he said:

"I have always understood that Mr. Bolton was a very rich man."

"It is true, Mr. Carter, that he was generally accounted so," was the reply. "It is also true that his wealth

was greatly overestimated. Nevertheless, there is more than sufficient funds belonging to him, in the shape of securities that are now in our hands, to cover the loss I have mentioned. That is what puzzles me so greatly."

"I don't think that I quite understand you, Mr. Horton," said the detective.

"What I mean to say is this: That although eight hundred thousand dollars in cash have disappeared from our vaults, and there seems to be no doubt that Mr. Bolton took it with him when he went away, the fact still remains that he has left enough collateral security here—negotiable securities, mind you—to cover that loss and a little more."

"So, as a matter of fact, he has stolen nothing?"

"As a matter of fact, he has stolen nothing. What he did was merely to exchange his securities for cash. But you see, he did it without consulting any of us—and he disappeared in a very mysterious manner."

"Wait a moment, Mr. Horton, until I get this matter perfectly straight in my mind."

"Very well."

"As I understand you, Mr. Hiram Bolton, president of this trust company, went away somewhere yesterday afternoon about one o'clock. He took with him eight hundred thousand dollars in cash that was in the vaults at the time. He left behind him as security for that loan—if we may call it that—signed securities which are quite ample to make up the sum he took away with him, so as a matter of fact the bank is not a loser; there has really been no crime committed, has there?"

"No."

"Then what do you wish me to do?"

"I want you to find Bolton for me."

"Why? If his accounts are correct, and if there is nothing against him, isn't it likely that he has just taken the money for a flier of some sort, and that he will show up here at his desk some time during the day?"

Mr. Horton shook his head emphatically.

"I am convinced that there is a mystery about the affair somewhere, that ought to be unveiled. There is something wrong."

"It is possible," said the detective, "that the securities he left to cover the eight hundred thousand dollars are only a blind to keep you from discovering too quickly other defalcations in connection with him. Possibly he left the securities merely to pull wool over your eyes, to give him time to get away so that he could not be found, or caught."

"I have thought of that; but I hardly think it is true. Still, I shall have the books thoroughly gone over at once."

"He may not have disappeared at all; you may be imagining it, Mr. Horton."

"No; I feel quite sure of the disappearance part of it. He did not go home last night."

"He isn't the first man who has remained out overnight."

"Oh, I know that—and it wouldn't be the first time that he has remained out overnight, either."

"Why do you fix the time of his disappearance at one o'clock?" asked the detective.

"Because it was exactly one o'clock when I parted with him."

"Where? Where were you when you parted with him?"

"We were standing together on the front steps of this building. We had started to go to luncheon together."

"Well? Suppose you tell me about it?"

"We have been in the habit of lunching together—not daily, you understand, but frequently. Yesterday I was out all the morning. I returned here a little before one. He was in his private office—that one there—and I went to the door and asked him if we should go to luncheon together. He replied that he would be ready in a moment. Very soon after that he came out and joined me. He carried a bulky package in his hands."

"The eight hundred thousand, I suppose," said the detective.

"Probably. I did not suspect it then, of course. I said to him: 'What in the world have you got there?'

"'Some things I promised to send up to my wife,' he replied; and we passed out of the building and paused for a moment on the front steps."

"And then——" asked Nick.

"We usually take our lunch at the Holland House. It is handy and quiet, and we like it; and yesterday, as we paused on the front steps of this building, he turned to me and said:

"'You go ahead, Harry, and get a table. Order for both of us and I will be there with you before it is served.' I said I would, and I went down the avenue toward the Holland House. I did not look back again, so I could not possibly tell which way Bolton went after I left him. In fact, I did not see him again after that moment, nor have I been able to find anybody else who did see him.

"I found a table and ordered for two, as he had directed me to do. I waited until it was getting cold, and then ate my own luncheon. He did not come. I still waited. Altogether I sat there at that table more than an hour; but at last I gave him up, paid for the service, and returned here. That is all I know about it."

"When was the discovery made that the cash was missing?"

"When we closed, yesterday. But in the meantime I had become greatly perplexed because Bolton did not return. There were two important appointments he had made for the afternoon, but he did not keep them. At

half-past two I telephoned to his home—he had not been there. When we found that the cash was missing, I was distracted for a moment—until I found also that there would be no loss, and that, at the most, his conduct was only an irregularity."

"Well? What more?"

"For the sake of covering up everything and fixing it so that the directors would not ask ugly questions, I took the securities over personally, that Bolton had left behind him, and deposited my own check for the sum that had disappeared. So far as the trust company is concerned, it is all regular enough now. Don't you see why I am up in the air about it?"

"Why, yes. I see why you are greatly puzzled; but all the same, it seems to me likely that before the day is out Mr. Bolton will show up and will have a good laugh at you for all your worries and misgivings."

Horton shook his head in evident doubt.

"I don't think so," he said.

"Are you fearful, then, that when you have the books examined you will find more 'irregularities,' as you call them?"

"I am greatly afraid—now—that I will."

"Do you know of any reason why Bolton should have wished to disappear?"

"No. Not one. Not the suggestion of one."

"Do you know anything about his private affairs?"

"No; only that so far as I know they are all right."

"Is Mr. Bolton happily married?"

"His wife is my sister."

"If you will pardon me, Mr. Horton, that is scarcely an answer to my question."

"I have no reason to suppose that he was unhappy, sir."

"Have you communicated your fears to your sister? To Mrs. Bolton?"

"Not wholly. I have not been to the house to see her. I have only talked with her over the telephone."

"What does she suggest about it? I take it, from what you say, that since he did not go home last night, she is more or less worried."

"Naturally."

"What does she suggest, as a solution of the mystery?"

"Nothing at all. She thinks as you do, that he will show up during the day."

"That seems to me likely, Mr. Horton. Have you communicated your fears to anybody else?"

"I have talked with Bolton's brother, over the telephone. I did not know but that he possibly might have gone there. I refer to Mr. Ralph Bolton. Possibly you may have heard of him, or may even know him, Mr. Carter.

"I have heard of him, but I do not know him. In fact, I don't think that I have ever seen either of the Boltons. Ralph Bolton, I believe, is something of a sport, isn't he?"

"Yes. I suppose so. He owns some race-horses. I believe he is called something of a plunger, too."

"He knew nothing about his brother, you say?"

"Not a thing."

"Well, Mr. Horton, don't you think you had better wait twenty-four hours before you start me out on a search for the lost president?" asked the detective, smiling.

"No, sir, I do not. I wish you, if you will, to begin at once your search for him. I am as thoroughly convinced in my own mind that something is wrong and that Bolton will not return as if it were already an established fact."

"By the way," said Nick, "you say it was currency that he took with him. Was any of that currency—could any of it be traced, do you think?"

"No, I do not. It was merely a collection of currency, tied in packages, and placed in the vault. There is no way of tracing any of it."

CHAPTER II.

HIRAM BOLTON'S BIG BANK-ROLL.

"There is only one thing," said the detective after a short pause, "which would lead me to think that perhaps you are correct in supposing that Bolton has purposely disappeared, or fled, if you prefer to put it that way."

"But I do not. I don't want to think of him as having fled. From what would he flee?"

"That is a question which you are more competent to answer than I am, Mr. Horton. If his accounts are straight, there would seem to be no reason why he should elect to disappear."

"Of course I do not yet know positively if his accounts are straight."

"When you do know, it would be well to inform me at once; that is if I am to have anything to do with the case."

"Tell me, Mr. Carter, to what you referred a moment ago when you said that there was one thing which would lead you to think that I was correct about the matter."

"I referred to the fact that he took so much cash out of the bank with him. What would he want with all that cash?"

"That I cannot venture to say. Only this: He knew as well as I know that no record had been kept of those bills, of their numbers or denomination. He knew that they could not be traced."

"I see."

"Eight hundred thousand dollars would relieve him of the necessity of having checks cashed. It would lessen the chances of tracing him."

"Infinitely. Bolton is your brother-in-law, you say?"

"Yes."

"You and he have always been on friendly terms?"

"Perfectly."

"Have you been what you would call intimate?"

"Yes. You might almost call it that."

"Do you know about his private life, and his habits?"

"As well as anybody knows or has known about them."

"That is rather an ambiguous reply, Mr. Horton."

"Well, I mean by that that Bolton has always been a man who never permitted anybody to get very close to him."

"Reserved in his manner?"

"Not apparently; but still there was always a reserve; always a barrier which he put between himself and anybody who attempted to get too close to him."

"I understand."

"Even his wife has always felt that."

"Well, to return to his private life and affairs. Do you know, or do you suspect that he may have had entanglements?"

"I have never had the slightest suspicion of that sort about him."

"Was he a gambler, do you know?"

"I have never known him to venture a dollar upon any sort of chance—not even in Wall Street. I have heard him say often, laughingly, that he left all that sort of thing to his younger brother."

"How old a man is Bolton?"

"Forty-five."

"And his brother?"

"Is about forty, possibly a little more. I don't think there is much difference between them."

"I have never to my knowledge seen Mr. Hiram Bolton. Can you give me some idea of his appearance?"

"Have you never seen his brother, either?"

"I told you a little bit ago that I had not; but now I do remember that I saw him once at the Sheepshead Bay race-track. I have recalled the fact since we have been talking."

"The two are very much alike. Hiram is heavier, bigger, stouter, and older in appearance than his brother Ralph. Hiram also has a purple birthmark, a third as large as the palm of your hand, on the left side of his face a little below and in front of the ear. Otherwise the two are very much alike in appearance. I have noticed, too, that their voices are alike."

"May I ask if you requested Mr. Ralph Bolton to come here to see you?"

"I did. He said he would come as soon as he could. I am looking for him at any moment."

"Has Bolton always been regular in his attendance at business?"

"Why, yes; rather so. He has not been as devoted to it as I sometimes wished. But then, he left a great deal to me, you know. I am vice-president here, and I often acted for him."

There was a tap on the door at that moment, and, in response to Horton's summons, it opened and Ralph Bolton entered the room.

He was a man almost six feet in height and magnificently built. His skin was unusually white, and his eyes were piercingly black; so were his mustache and hair. He was faultlessly dressed and he was undoubtedly a handsome man. Horton leaped from his chair as he entered.

"Ah, Ralph!" he exclaimed, "I am awfully glad you have come. Let me introduce you to Mr. Carter. Mr. Carter, Mr. Ralph Bolton. Sit down, Ralph. Tell me what you make out of all this mystery, anyway."

"You forget, Harry, that I don't yet know what the mystery is."

"I told you that over the phone."

"You told me that Hiram was missing; but—I can't think that it amounts to anything."

"He has been missing since one o'clock yesterday. When he went away he had eight hundred thousand dollars of the trust company's money with him."

Ralph Bolton started to his feet.

"Do you mean to tell me," he exclaimed, "that my brother *stole* the money?"

"Oh, he left security for it, all right; but he did it without the consent of any of the directors or of the other officers of the company. But that isn't the point."

"What is the point, then?"

"The point is that he had all the money with him. What did he want of it? Why should he have taken it at all without consulting me? Why did he go away?"

"My dear fellow, am I my brother's keeper? You ask me all those questions, as if I should know the answers offhand. You know mighty well that there has been very little in common between Hiram and myself for a long time."

"I know that."

"We scarcely ever saw each other at all."

"I remember now that I have never once seen you together."

"Well, he avoided me, and I dodged him. He didn't approve of my manner of living, and I didn't enjoy his criticisms—and there you are. I have called here at the bank to see him now and then, as you know—and have never found him in once, when I did so. I suppose he merely declined to see me; eh?"

"No. It has always been your ill luck that you should call when he was out."

"Look here, Horton, I don't think that Hiram would do anything wrong."

"Neither do I—but just as sure as you are sitting there in that chair, he has skipped out now."

"But why? What reason would he have to skip out?"

"I don't know. That is what I want to find out."

"He hasn't had trouble with his wife, has he?"

"Not that I know about."

"How much is Hiram worth, anyhow, Horton?" the brother asked, after a moment.

"I should say just about an even million, without including the house he lives in."

"And he took away eight hundred thousand?"

"Yes."

"That would leave two hundred thousand to the good, in case he did not return, eh?"

"Yes."

"And that, and the house, and so forth, would go to his wife, all right, wouldn't it?"

"Certainly."

"Then, if I were you, I shouldn't bother to look for him. Let him go. Hiram always had a sanctimonious streak in him, you know. I shouldn't wonder if it had struck to his brain and made him daffy. Of course his wife naturally wants to find him——"

"She does not yet entirely understand the situation."

"It appears to me that none of us do that."

The detective had listened quietly to all this conversation between the two men; but now he joined in the talk.

"Did I understand you to say, Mr. Bolton, that you and your brother were not on good terms with each other?" he asked.

"No; I didn't say that. I said we avoided each other."

"I understand."

"I am called something of a sport, Mr. Carter. I own a string of horses, and I follow the races rather closely, at times. Sometimes I leave them alone. I like to take a flier in the Street. I will go up against a faro-bank or the wheel, at a pinch. My brother never did any of these things, and he never approved of my doing it. He avoided me because he did not approve of my way of life, and I have avoided him because I got tired of hearing him say so."

"But you remained good friends."

"Oh, yes. We never quarreled in our lives, since we were boys, you know."

"He is older than you?"

"Two and a half years."

"And somewhat heavier?"

"Oh, yes; considerably heavier."

"How about height?"

"I think we are about the same height."

"Mr. Horton tells me that you rather closely resemble each other."

"Yes. I believe that is so. Hiram has a touch or two of gray in his hair, and he has an unfortunate birthmark on his face—right here, I think it is. Otherwise, I reckon we are considerably alike."

"I shouldn't think him as tall as you, Ralph," interposed Horton.

"That is because he stoops a trifle; but he is the same height."

"When did you see your brother last, Mr. Bolton?" asked Nick.

"I haven't seen him to speak with him—save over the phone, and you could hardly call that seeing—in more than a month."

"You had no idea, of course, that he contemplated such a move as this one?"

"No more than you had, sir."

"And you have no way to account for his wanting all that money in cash, all at once?"

"I am as much in the dark about it as you are, Mr. Carter."

"Could you suggest any place where he might have gone? Where he might be likely to go, in a case of this kind?"

"I haven't the ghost of an idea, sir."

"Some relative, or——"

"Hiram and I haven't a relative in the world who is near enough to us to be classed under that head. But, look here, Mr. Carter, I'll tell you what I candidly think about it. I do think that you are needlessly exercised over this affair. I haven't a doubt that he will turn up all right before the close of the day. If I were you, Horton, I wouldn't go off the hooks about it until I knew that something was wrong."

CHAPTER III.

EXPLAINING THE UNACCOUNTABLE.

After Ralph Bolton had left the room the detective was silent a considerable time; then, rather abruptly, he said to Mr. Horton:

"When do you propose to have Hiram Bolton's accounts examined?"

"They are being examined now, Mr. Carter; but I am doing it inside the bank instead of sending out for experts. I have two of our best men on them now."

"When do you think you will be in a position to speak definitely about the condition of those accounts?"

"I should think that I would know something about them by closing-time to-night."

"In that case, Mr. Horton, I think it will be as well if I do nothing about this matter until you know a little bit better where you stand."

"The condition of his accounts, whether they are right or wrong, can make no difference to the fact that he has disappeared and that I want to find him," insisted Horton.

"I know that very well; but the condition of his accounts will make a very great difference to me in my manner of searching for him."

"Why so?"

"Because if I am positive that when he disappeared he was an honest man, I should go about the search very differently than I would if I knew he was an embezzler."

"I think I understand you."

"I have made it plain enough. Let me ask you a question."

"Well?"

"If he should not return—if no trace of him is found, and if it should turn out that he is a thief, is his wife provided for with funds of her own? With funds that the bank could not attach, to pay his debts?"

"Amply. She inherited a fortune of her own. I am positive that that is now intact."

"Well, Mr. Horton, I will prophesy one of two things: Mr. Hiram Bolton will return here some time during the day, or you will hear from him, which will be the same thing—*or*, you will find, on examining his accounts, that the bank has been robbed."

"And before beginning your search for him, I am to understand that you prefer to wait until we know more about his books; is that the idea?"

"That is precisely the idea."

"All right, Mr. Carter. How shall I notify you?"

"I was about to ask you if you would come around to my house as soon as you know about it."

"Yes. I will do that. I think you may expect me some time before six to-night."

"I will wait in for you," replied the detective, rising.

"In the meantime would you advise that I say anything more to his wife?" asked Horton.

"I should advise that you say absolutely nothing to anybody at all until we know exactly where you stand in this matter. The least said the soonest mended, you know."

"Yes."

When Nick left the trust company offices, he strolled down Fifth Avenue toward the Hotel Mammoth; but he had not covered half the distance before he saw Ralph Bolton leisurely approaching him; and instantly it occurred to the detective that Hiram Bolton's brother had been watching and waiting for him to come out of the bank.

"I have been waiting for you, Carter," he said.

"Indeed?" replied the detective. "Have you thought of something that will help to clear up this mystery?"

"No; I can't say that I have; but I wanted to talk with you about it. Will you come into the Mammoth for a few moments?"

"Certainly."

They found their way to the café and selected a table in a far corner of the room.

"I suppose," said Nick, "that you have something to suggest about the disappearance of your brother, else you would not have waited for me. Is that the case?"

"Partly."

"Well?"

"You will remember that while I was at the bank I took the attitude that Hiram would not be long missing—that he would show up again during the day."

"Yes."

"Well, that was a bluff. My honest opinion is that he has skipped out."

"Have you any really good reason for that opinion, Mr. Bolton?"

"I think I have."

"What is it?"

"I was not quite truthful when I told you up there that Hiram and I had not met for so long a time. The fact of the matter is that he was at my rooms to see me a week ago—let me see—yes, it was a week ago to-night."

"And did he say something to you at that visit, which led you to suppose——"

"Hold on, Mr. Carter. Let's not go too fast."

"All right. You are doing the driving. What is it that you wish to tell me?"

"When my man told me that my brother wished to see me, you could have knocked me down with a feather. He had not been to my apartment for months—and the last time he was there he told me that he should never come to it again."

"Did you quarrel?"

"No; not at all. He always had that confounded sanctimonious air about him which made me tired. I had been plunging rather heavily, and had lost considerably, and he lectured me about it. I told him it was none of his business, that I was of age and old enough to take care of myself. I reminded him that whether I was a winner or a loser, I had never yet asked him for a dollar, and I never should, and the result was that he presently got on his high horse, and, after making the remark that he should not bother me again, he left."

"Well, what more?"

"I told him that blood was thicker than water, and that if he would only leave my private and personal affairs alone there was no reason why we could not be affectionate brothers to the end of time."

"And what did he say to that?"

"He sneered a little, and said that he thought it would be quite as well if we ceased to have anything to do with each other. I told him he could do as he pleased about that, but I wished him to remember that I did not forget that we were brothers if he did, and that I would always be glad to see him, at any time he chose to look me up. With that, we parted."

"And that was why you were so surprised when he appeared at your apartment a week ago to-night?"

"Yes."

"Before you explain the purpose of that call, Mr. Bolton, I would like to ask you a question or two."

"Very well."

"Please remember that you have invited this interview yourself, won't you?"

"Certainly."

"And also that I have been retained by the trust company to find your brother?"

"Of course."

"Is it true that you have never asked your brother for money?"

"It is absolutely true. I have never, since we have been men, borrowed a penny of him. I am not sure that I would not have gone to him if I had been in a tight place at any time; but the fact remains that I never did so."

"And after that scene that you have just described—did you cherish any hard feelings toward him?"

"Not at all. I never thought of such a thing."

"Do you think he was angry with you?"

"No; we know each other too well for that. As the elder brother, he did what he considered his duty in remonstrating with me. I considered it none of his business, and told him so. That was all there was to it. His call upon me that I am about to describe proves that."

"Well? Tell me about that call, for if I remember the beginning of this conversation, there was something said between you that night which has suggested a possible solution to this disappearance."

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

"I was surprised that he should have called upon me, and told him so. He replied that he had been very unhappy because we had parted as we had. I told him to forget it—as I had already done. He lighted one of my cigars and sat silent for some time, and then he said:

"'Ralph, I don't want you to misunderstand me—I don't want you to think that I am harping on the old subject, for I am not; but I have got a proposition to make to you.'

"'Indeed?' I said. 'What is it?'

"He replied, 'I am getting very tired of things as they are. I am overworked and I am not happy. I have been thinking of taking a long rest from the cares of my business, and from another care which has become almost more than I can bear.'

"I asked him what he referred to, and he replied, after considerable hesitation, that he was not happy in his home.

"I need not attempt to quote his words exactly; but the substance of what he told me was that he and his wife were far from happy together. Outwardly—that is, so far as outsiders could observe—they lived in perfect harmony, but the fact remained that there was settled discord within; and he was tired of the whole thing."

"Go on," said the detective. "What was his proposition to you?"

"It took him two hours to tell me what I shall impart to you in less than a minute; but the substance of it was that he proposed if I would agree to give up my racing and gambling and settle down to business, he would make me a trustee of his interest in the trust company, he would induce the directors to elect me president in his place, he would leave all his affairs in my hands, and he would go away for a year or two of travel—ostensibly for his health, but in reality to get rid of his wife—or rather to get away from her. And now, Mr. Carter, you are in possession of all that I know or can guess about it."

Nick nodded.

"Of course, you will understand," continued Bolton, "that I did not want to refer to these things in the presence of the brother of Hiram's wife."

"Certainly not."

"But I felt that you ought to know them. It was for that reason that I waited outside and kept watch until you appeared."

"And your idea now is that he has turned those securities into cash, and simply disappeared?"

"Yes."

"I take it, then, that you peremptorily refused his offer; eh?"

"Certainly. It was preposterous on the face of it. In the first place I couldn't settle down and become a cut and dried business man—a banker; I have tried it and I know. And in the second place, even if Hiram were willing, you don't suppose that the directors of the trust company would place *me* at the head of the concern, do you?"

"No, not with your reputation."

"Well, there you are. But to my mind that conversation I had with Hiram explains the present disappearance."

"I don't know but it does. And yet it seems to me that a man of his caliber would have taken a different method of disappearing."

Bolton shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know," he said. "Anyhow, you have now got my version of the matter. You can take it for what it is worth. But I am quite sure that when the mystery is solved, if it ever is, you will find that domestic unhappiness is behind it all."

CHAPTER IV.

STOLEN—A MILLION AND A HALF.

The detective leaned back in his chair and lighted a fresh cigar.

"I suppose you have met your brother's wife?" he asked of Ralph Bolton.

"Oh, yes. A great many times. Not so frequently of late years as formerly."

"How long have they been married?"

"About eight or nine years, I think."

"Any children?"

"No."

"She has a private fortune of her own, I understand."

"Yes."

"Can you tell me something about the woman herself, Mr. Bolton?"

"Very little. She is generally considered very charming; she certainly is a beautiful woman. She is also extremely popular. Personally, I admire her very much indeed. Personally, I am inclined to think that the fault was more with my brother than with her."

"She is younger than your brother?"

"No; they are about the same age. She was a widow when he married her—a childless widow. She is Horton's sister, you know."

"Yes."

"I sometimes think, Mr. Carter, that if we would stop to consider how little we know about the inside domestic affairs of couples who have trouble we would be less ready to criticize them for what they do. We see only what appears on the surface—only what they are willing that the world should see. We do not know what is behind the scenes."

"That is very true."

"When I hear of separations and divorces—when I read about them in the paper—I always think, 'Well, they know their own affairs best.' I couldn't live with a woman who nagged and scolded and bothered, and kept things in a turmoil—and I wouldn't."

"You are not a married man yourself?"

Ralph Bolton smiled and stroked his glossy black mustache.

"Yes," he replied slowly, "I am. Hiram does not know it; Horton doesn't know it. I was married six months ago to the best little woman that was ever born into the world."

"Your enthusiasm does you credit," said the detective, smiling.

"Do you mind telling me something about what you propose to do in the search for my brother?" asked Bolton, with an abrupt change of the subject.

"Not at all," replied the detective. "It was agreed between Mr. Horton and I, that I should wait until he had completed his examination of Hiram Bolton's accounts—which he thought would be done this afternoon. After that I will take up the search in earnest, provided he has not reappeared."

"So; Horton thinks that there may be something crooked at the bank, does he?"

"No. He did not think so. It was I who thought it a probability."

"You?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You are not going to take offense at what I say, are you, Bolton?"

"No; certainly not."

"Well, the very methods adopted by Hiram Bolton, suggest to me that there is a nigger in the fence somewhere."

"Why so?"

"His taking the eight hundred thousand in cash and leaving securities, signed and executed, to more than cover that amount, suggested to me that the securities were intended to cover more than appeared on the surface."

"I don't think I understand—quite."

"It struck me that possibly the securities were intended to lull any suspicions that Mr. Horton or his associates might entertain, and therefore to put off the examination into the real affairs of your brother until the last moment. That would give him more time."

"You think that Hiram is a thief, then, Mr. Carter?"

"If he does not return, or we do not hear from him before the closing-hour to-day, I will think that he is a thief—or I will think that there has been some sort of foul play."

"Foul play? How could there be foul play, at the time of day he was supposed to have disappeared?"

"Of course I cannot answer that question now; nor, in fact, any of your questions. I fancy that either of us knows just as much about this affair as the other. If you and your brother had been more intimate you might have helped; but as it stands, you are as much a stranger to the proceedings as anybody could be."

"Exactly."

"Save for the one fact of that interview you had with him a week ago. Let me ask you—when he suggested going away for a long rest, and leaving you to fill his place, did he make mention of any particular part of the world where he thought of going?"

"No; he said only one thing on that point."

"What was that?"

"He said that if he went away he would lose himself so thoroughly that nobody would have any idea where he was until he chose to reappear again."

"Do you happen to own a photograph of your brother, Mr. Bolton?"

"No. I don't think he ever had one taken in his life. If he did I don't know it."

"I regard it as rather unfortunate that I never saw him," said Nick.

"Well, Mr. Carter, if you will look squarely at me, imagine me to be twenty-five pounds heavier than I am;

imagine a slight stoop in my shoulders, and just the suggestion of a limp in my left leg; imagine some gray mixed with my hair and with my mustache; imagine me as wearing gold-rimmed spectacles, and last, imagine a purple birthmark as large as two silver dollars just in front of and a little below the left ear—if you will look at me and imagine all that, you will have a very good picture of my brother in your mind."

"Thank you. I think I can do all that very well, indeed."

"He is two and a half years older than I, and he looks ten. That is due to the gray hairs, to the spectacles, to the slight stoop, to the slight halt in his walk, and so forth."

"I suppose, Mr. Bolton, that you are as anxious to find your brother as Horton is?"

"No; to tell you the truth, I am not. If he went away of his own free will and accord, let him go, I say. Of course, if he has defaulted at the bank he should be found and brought back; but I don't believe he has done that. If there has been foul play, I should, of course, like to know it, and to have those who did it punished. But if I was certain—and I do feel almost certain of it—that he went away deliberately, and with intention to shunt it all, I wouldn't turn over my hand to find him."

The detective rose from his chair and made ready to start away. Bolton arose, also.

"I would like to have you keep me informed, however, Mr. Carter, if you will be so good. I would like to know just what turns up about that investigation."

"If you will give me your address——" began the detective; and Bolton at once produced his card.

"I live at the Croydon apartments, as you see," he said.

They parted then and Nick went directly to his own home—and in the stress of other matters dismissed the Bolton affair from his mind until shortly after four o'clock he was reminded of it, when Joseph brought him a card which bore the name of Henry Horton. Nick descended to the library for the interview.

But the moment he entered the room he saw by the expression of Horton's face that something had been discovered.

"It is as you suggested, Carter," Horton began at once. "Bolton was and is a defaulter."

Nick nodded. He had more than half-expected this intelligence.

"He has taken altogether," continued Mr. Horton, "fifteen hundred thousand dollars—a million and a half. There is the eight hundred thousand in cash that he took yesterday——"

"But he left securities behind him to cover that," suggested Nick, with a smile, for he knew now what was coming.

"The securities were forgeries, Carter. They are no good."

"And so, having deposited your own check to cover that amount, you have got to stand that loss now; eh?"

"Exactly."

"And you say there is seven hundred thousand besides?"

"Yes."

"You need not go into details about how he got away with it, for that part of it doesn't interest me. It is sufficient to know that he did it."

"He did it just as he did the other. He took the cash from time to time and deposited forged securities in place of it. He has taken nothing from the bank but cash, and it has always been cash that could not be traced."

"Do you think it was that eight hundred thousand that he had in the bundle when you parted with him on the steps of the bank yesterday, Mr. Horton?"

"I haven't a doubt of it."

"I suppose you had already, before you called me into the case, tried to find out which way he went when he left the bank?"

"Yes. But nobody seems to have seen him at all after I parted from him. As I told you, I did not look around after I started down the avenue, so I don't know, either."

"When did he take the seven hundred thousand?" asked Nick.

"At different times. The first theft that we find any trace of occurred six months ago."

"Six months ago," Nick repeated after him; and he added to himself, "Where have I heard that expression once before to-day? Oh, yes!" It came to him suddenly that Ralph Bolton had told him that he was married six months ago.

"It began," continued the banker, "with a theft of fifty thousand, then another fifty; after that there was a hundred and fifty all at once; and following that the thefts were in sums of fifty and a hundred thousand at a time, until the seven hundred thousand was taken."

"And out of that you have got to stand eight hundred thousand personally?"

"Carter, I have decided to stand it all. I have done it for the sake of my sister. I am a rich man and I can do it. I do it also for the sake of the public confidence. I have already covered the loss, and there shall be no intelligence of it outside the bank if I can help it."

"Don't you think you are rather quixotic about it?"

"Possibly. But it is my wish. But more than ever now, I want to find Bolton."

"And if I find him, and there's no charge against him——"

"But there will be a charge against him. It will be

time enough to let the public know about it when he have got the man. Until then I prefer to keep it quiet."

"Just as you say, Mr. Horton. By the way, won't you tell me a little more about Ralph Bolton?"

"More about Ralph Bolton? What do you want to know about him?"

"Only what you think about him. He strikes me as being a particularly shrewd sort of a person—and it wouldn't surprise me a bit if we found that he knows all about this disappearance of his brother."

"But really, Carter, that is nonsense, you know. I personally know that they had almost nothing to do with each other. Ralph would have been the very last man in the world whom Hiram would have taken into his confidence."

"Possibly. Still, I think that I shall make it my business to know more about Ralph Bolton, all the same. What do you know about him, Horton?"

"Nothing at all, only that he is a handsome daredevil sort of a fellow. I never thought there was anything malicious about him."

"For a banker, Mr. Horton, your confidence in human nature is overwhelming," said the detective, with an enigmatical smile.

CHAPTER V.

NICK CARTER ENTERTAINS SUSPICIONS.

"Chick," said the detective to his first assistant, half an hour later, when Mr. Horton had gone, "we have got a case now which is a little bit different from any that I remember to have had."

"What is it all about?" asked Chick.

"A banker, who is widely respected—the president of a trust company, starts for luncheon with one of the vice-presidents of the same institution at one o'clock in the afternoon. As he leaves his office he carries a large package in his hand. Being asked what the package contains, he replies that it is something that he is about to send to his home.

"On the front steps of the building he pauses, and says to his companion, 'You order the luncheon for both of us and I will join you at the table before it is served.' His companion walks on down to the Holland House.

"But the point is that from the moment the trust company president stood upon the front steps with his companion and with the package in his hands, nothing has been seen of him and no trace of him has been obtained.

"Wait a minute, Chick, I haven't finished yet. The package already referred to is now believed to have contained eight hundred thousand dollars in cash——"

"Gee!" said Chick. "That was quite a 'lift.'"

"——and it has since been discovered that the man had already stolen seven hundred thousand dollars besides that.

"The vice-president of the trust company—the same one who ordered the two luncheons—has engaged me to find the president, whose name, by the way, is Hiram Bolton."

"I know him," said Chick. "That is, I know him by sight. He has a birthmark on his face, hasn't he?"

"Yes."

"And he has a brother who is an all-around sport, hasn't he?"

"Yes. What do you know about either of them, Chick?"

"Nothing more than to know them by sight. I have seen the brother at the race-tracks and I have seen the other one on the street. He was pointed out to me one day, that is all."

"Well, I have succeeded in gleaning this much of Hiram Bolton's history. He appeared in Wall Street about fifteen years ago. He had some money, nobody seems to know how much, but it is generally believed that he did not have as much as he was credited with.

"He was fortunate in his speculations. He made money—and incidentally he made many influential friends.

"He had a habit of disappearing altogether for days at a time, and then bobbing up again as suddenly as he had disappeared. When asked where he had been, his invariable reply was that he had been 'resting up a bit.'

"It was about ten years ago that the trust company of which he is the president was organized. Two or three years after that he married a sister of one of his associates—a lady who was then a widow.

"Outwardly they appear to have been very well contented with each other, but I have it on reliable authority that they were not as happily married as was supposed.

"There is the case, Chick. Bolton disappeared at the door of the trust company offices. Not a sign of him has been seen since that moment. So far as any trace of him is concerned, he might as well have gone up in a balloon. Where are we to look for him?"

"Have you talked with the brother?" asked Chick.

"Yes. He is—apparently—as much in the air as we are."

"I notice," said Chick, smiling while he reached out for a box of matches that was on the table between them, "that you give a significant emphasis to that word 'apparently.' Why do you do that?"

"Because, without the ghost of a reason for a suspicion, I cannot help suspecting that Ralph Bolton knows what has become of his brother."

"Do you mean by that that you think it possible that Ralph Bolton has made away with his brother in order to possess himself of that money?"

"N-no. I hadn't gone as far as that. That is coming it a little too strong. But I did somehow get the idea that Ralph knows more about Hiram than he admits.

You see, Chick, this Ralph strikes me as being about as slick as they make them. He is about the smoothest proposition you ever saw. He always says the right thing in the right place and at the right time. He waited for me outside the bank to-day to tell me that he thought the reason for Hiram's disappearance was because he and his wife were not happy together."

"Well, what is there remarkable about that?"

"Merely the fact that he should want to tell me about it at all. He told me another bit of news that was equally interesting'"

"What was that?"

"He said that at the time Hiram called upon him to tell him about his domestic difficulties he also said that he wanted to shake it all and to go away—and it appears that he—that is, Hiram—actually asked his brother at that time to accept a trusteeship from him and to take his place in the bank; and all that, Chick, notwithstanding the fact that the two brothers have never been good friends, they have never seen any more of each other than they could help, and there has never, within the recollection of anybody who knows them, been anything in common between the two."

"All of which makes that story sound rather fishy, doesn't it?"

"Well, that is the way in which it impressed me."

"In fact, the brother talked rather too much."

"Altogether too much. For a man who is as smooth and slick as he evidently is on every other matter, he was dreadfully stupid in his talk with me."

"Why do you suppose he chose to talk with you at all?"

"Chick, if I could answer that question to my entire satisfaction, I would have a solution of the mystery at the same time. But we won't discuss that any further now. I am going to make use of you in this case, Chick."

"Good. What am I to do?"

"I am going to put you upon the direct case. I am going to send you to Horton in the morning for your final instructions, and you must make him believe that you are Nick Carter. I am personally going to take the trail of Ralph Bolton."

"You have an idea that that will lead you to a solution of the case by the shortest way, eh?"

"Yes, I have. But I wish to be on the safe side at the same time, so I turn over the direct case to you."

"But I don't see as there is any direct case. There is no trail to follow."

"Not unless you can find one."

"I think," said Chick musingly, "that if I had my choice as to whom I would talk with about the matter just now, it would be Mrs. Hiram Bolton."

"Why?" asked Nick.

"I would like to hear what she has to say about the disappearance of her husband."

"I am going there to-night with Horton, her brother. I promised him that before he went away; or rather I made him promise that he would take me there."

"I wish you would let me go with you."

"I can't very well. I would send you in my place, only that my chief reason for wishing to see her is to ask her some questions about her brother-in-law."

"Ralph?"

"Yes."

"You can tell me, when you return, of anything that would be of interest to my part of the game."

"I'll do that. I think I should be back home between ten and eleven. Then we will take a few minutes to make the final arrangements. But the understanding is that you are to make yourself up to represent me, in the morning, and you are to wear that make-up until further notice."

"What are you going to do yourself?"

"I haven't definitely determined yet. I am sure of only one thing, and that is that I am going to cultivate the acquaintance and the friendship, if necessary, of Ralph Bolton, and I shall stick to him until he takes me to his brother, or until I am certain that he cannot do it."

"It looks to me as if it might be a long game that you are going to play."

"It is likely to be. I don't believe that Ralph Bolton is a man who takes readily to new acquaintances. However, I will find a way to get at him."

"You must feel pretty certain that he knows."

"I feel certain only of one thing, that there is another mystery behind this one, in which both the brothers are or were concerned; and that it is that other mystery which has kept them apart. I don't believe they held aloof from each other from choice; I think they did it because it was policy to do so."

"But why——"

"Chick, I can smell a mystery almost the same as a hunting-dog smells the track of game. In this case I smell a mystery and the scent gets hotter every time I think of Ralph Bolton. I don't know why."

Chick chuckled.

"It wouldn't surprise me," he said, "if you should find out later on that Ralph Bolton had murdered his own brother in order to possess himself of all that money."

"It wouldn't surprise me, either," replied the detective, "if it were not for the fact that there is nothing that points that way. No, I don't believe it is that; but I do believe that Ralph Bolton knows at this very moment where Hiram Bolton is."

"And also where the money is, eh?"

"Naturally, if he knows about one he also knows about the other."

"All the same, Nick, if Hiram hadn't been intending

to make a skip of it, he wouldn't have brought all that money out of the bank with him."

"That goes without saying."

"And if he was intending to make a skip of it, why should he have taken his brother into his confidence on top of the fact that they were not intimate with each other?"

"There you have me again. But also, if they were not intimate—if the appearance of estrangement between them was not a bluff all the way through, why should Hiram have gone to his brother with the story of his domestic troubles, and with the proposition that Ralph assume his place for a time?"

"You only have Ralph's word for that."

"That is true enough; but he was telling me something—at least when he spoke of Hiram's wife—that was true. You can't always tell when a man is lying to you, but when he does tell the truth you are apt to recognize it."

"How are you going to get in touch with Ralph Bolton?"

"I haven't decided yet. He is a gambler. I'll find a way to get at him."

"I don't see that I have got a thing in the world to go by, at my end of the search."

"I would suggest one thing to you, Chick."

"What is that?"

"Look backward over the life of Hiram Bolton. Take him at the time of the formation of that trust company and follow his career backward to his boyhood. I think that something will come out of it if you do that."

"I'll do it. It is a splendid idea. If he has made a permanent skip of it there will be something in his past life to give me a tip where to search for him."

"That is my idea."

"There is the bell, Nick. I suppose it is Mr. Horton, come to take you to see Hiram's wife. I will wait up for you, no matter how late you are."

CHAPTER VI.

A QUESTION OF IDENTITIES.

At the home of Hiram Bolton the detective and Horton were ushered into a sumptuously appointed room where presently they were joined by the mistress of the house.

On the way up there Horton had said to Nick:

"Remember, I do not want anything said about the defalcations, Carter; and I think it will be just as well not to alarm my sister needlessly. I have not seen her since Hiram's disappearance. I have only talked with her over the telephone. I do not think, at the present moment, she takes the disappearance seriously—but you and I know that it is a serious matter and that he has no thought of returning."

"Very well," the detective had replied. "I will be governed by your suggestions. At the beginning of the interview I will leave you to do the talking, but later, if you can find an excuse to leave me alone with your sister for a few minutes, I should like it."

"Why? What do you wish to say that cannot be said in my presence?"

"Nothing, Horton. But you must know very little about women if you don't know that they never like to have a third person around when they are indulging in confidences. And besides, I have an idea that she will be inclined to be more frank with me than with you."

"You forget that I am her brother."

"No, I do not. It is because I remember it that I make that remark."

"I don't pretend to understand you."

"Brothers are apt to be the very last persons in the world whom we take into our confidences—especially where a woman is concerned. Anyway, humor me in this matter, will you?"

And so they entered the house and Mrs. Bolton came to them in the parlor.

Nick noticed that she was a thoroughly self-centered woman, cool, resourceful, entirely the master of her emotions and of herself.

She acknowledged the introduction to Nick without effusion, but in perfect taste, and then turning abruptly to her brother, she asked:

"Harry, have you any news of Hiram?"

"None whatever," her brother replied. "That is why I have brought Mr. Carter here. He is a detective of whom you have heard mention made. I have become so anxious about Hiram that I thought it best to call in the services of Mr. Carter—and he thought he would like to talk it over with you."

She turned her cool, calm eyes upon the detective and for a moment seemed to study him. Then, with a ghost of a smile on her lips, she said:

"I suppose it is the first idea of a detective, in a case of this sort, that there has been a quarrel of some sort between the husband and wife, is it not? Is that what you wished to ask me about, Mr. Carter?"

"I did not presuppose that there had been a quarrel, Mrs. Bolton," replied the detective. "I don't think I had it in mind to ask you any such questtion; but if there has been one, it might simplify matters if you were to tell me about it."

"There has been no quarrel," she said, at once. "Mr. Bolton and I never quarreled." Then she turned again to her brother.

"Do you really think that something has happened to Hiram?" she asked. "Or that he has gone away purposely, with no intention of returning—at least, not immediately?"

"I don't know what to think about it, Ruth," replied her brother evasively.

She still kept her eyes fixed upon Horton, and now, with perfect calmness, she asked:

"Are his accounts at the bank in perfect order?"

"Everything at the office is in order," he replied again, evasively.

"That does not reply to my question. Are his personal affairs all right?"

"Yes, they are all right," he responded again, lying splendidly to his sister.

Horton was glad that the detective had asked him to leave them alone together for a time, for now he wished to dodge his sister's questions, and he rose abruptly.

"I have got to run in at Clendennin's for a moment, Ruth, and I will leave you and Mr. Carter together for the time I am absent, if you will excuse me. It is only next door, Carter. I will be back in a few minutes."

Without ceremony he went out then, and the detective and the wife of the defaulter were alone.

"I suppose this is all prearranged," she said to him, as soon as her brother had gone.

"Partly," Nick asserted.

"Why?"

"I had an idea that you would prefer to talk with me alone, than in the presence of your brother. May I ask you what your impression of the affair is?"

"My impression——"

"Is it your idea that your husband will return, perhaps this evening, or to-morrow?"

"No," she replied calmly. "I do not think that he intends to return—ever."

"Ah! Had you any idea that he contemplated going away as he did?"

"I have had such an idea six months ago," she replied instantly.

Again that expression, "six months ago." It was strange how the sound of it affected the detective, and he asked instantly:

"Why do you fix the date of the beginning of your idea so exactly, madam?"

"Mr. Carter, I may as well be perfectly frank with you."

"If you please," madam.

"My husband and I have never been what the French call en rapport. He has always been evasive and elusive, on certain points, and my nature is so direct in all that concerns me that I have no patience with that sort of thing."

"I can understand that."

"We have been married eight years—or nearly eight. During those eight years I can assure you that I have never learned to know Hiram Bolton. We have always treated each other with studied courtesy; we have never quarreled; we have been husband and wife to each other, and yet, with it all, he have always been strangers. In his life he raised a barrier of some sort beyond which I was never able to pass; I suppose, in my own, that finally I raised up the same sort of a barrier.

"I don't think now that there was ever a question of love between us. I think in the beginning the marriage looked like the proper and best thing to do, for both of us. The fact of the matter is, Mr. Carter, I have always been a little bit afraid of Hiram Bolton, always been rather contemptuous of him. You must understand that we have both carefully guarded against any appearance of this condition leaking to the outside world."

"I understand that, madam."

"I will continue. It is well that you should know exactly how I feel about it now."

"I think so—yes."

"Mr. Bolton has never appeared to me to be quite natural."

"Natural? I don't understand you now."

"He has always impressed me as if he were playing a part; as if he were not precisely what he appeared to be; as if he were made up for the occasion, like a person at a masquerade. I have caught myself wondering, often, when the time to unmask would arrive. It seems to have come now."

"But surely, madam, in eight years of living together——"

"It is the same to-day as it was eight years ago—or rather it was the same when I saw him last, which was yesterday morning. Mind you, I haven't a fault to find with his demeanor or with his treatment of me, save that it was always cold and distant. But there has always been that present suggestion of some sort of deception. I do not know how to explain just what I mean."

"May I touch upon very delicate ground, madam?"

"You may ask me any question you like."

"You say there has never been any manifestations of affection between you, to speak of?"

"Yes."

"Have you any reason to suppose that somewhere there was—or is—another woman?"

"No. There have been times during the last six months when the idea has occurred to me, but I have dismissed it at once."

"Why?"

"Because he has always been too circumspect, too proper, too careful, too methodical, too mechanical in his conduct. As I said before, he has always seemed to be playing a part—and he had so schooled himself that he never for a moment forgot the part he was playing."

"So you dismissed the idea of another woman in the case, did you?"

"I have never seriously entertained the idea at all, sir."

"What reason do you give in your own mind for the present disappearance?"

She hesitated an instant before she replied, then she said:

"If my brother told me the truth about affairs at the trust company—if Hiram's affairs there *are* in perfect shape—and permit me to say here that I doubt it—I should say that his reason for going away was merely that he got tired of playing a part, and resolved to end it."

"I am afraid that I do not understand what you mean by that expression, 'playing a part.'"

"I don't think I understand it either, Mr. Carter."

"But can't you give me some better idea of what you do mean?"

"I don't think I can convey to you any more than the words imply. Let me see. It has been as if Hiram Bolton had not always been Hiram Bolton; as if in the past he had been another person entirely; as if he had put aside that other person to become Hiram Bolton, giving himself a part to play and studying it until it was so perfect that no mistake could be made. Do I make myself clear now?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Sometimes we know things intuitively which our reason refuses to accept—and it is proverbial that a woman's intuition is usually to be relied upon. I would like to ask you a few questions, Mr. Carter."

"Well?"

"You have been engaged by my brother to find Hiram Bolton, have you not?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because of the anxiety he feels for you, and for——"

"Let me interrupt you. Has Hiram taken funds from the bank which did not belong to him?"

"I suppose you ask that question because you want the truth, Mrs. Bolton?"

"Yes."

"Then I must answer you in the affirmative. But I must add that your brother was anxious to keep this information from you; also to keep it from the world at large—at least until we have found Mr. Bolton again."

"I will not tell my brother what I know. Is the amount large?"

"It is a million and a half." Nick thought it best to be perfectly frank with this woman, who took so coolly the blow that had fallen upon her. For say what you please, no woman likes to be deserted. He was not surprised at what she said next.

"I think, Mr. Carter, that it would be as well to let him go. I have no idea that he will return, or that he has any intention of returning. Even if he had not taken the money it would be the same, and I cannot help thinking that he took the money more because he wished to burn his bridges behind him than because he wanted the cash. Anyhow, whether you search for him or not, I don't believe you will find him."

"Why not, madam?"

"Because I believe he is no longer Hiram Bolton."

"No longer Hiram Bolton? Will you tell me what you mean by that?"

"I mean that I believe that Hiram Bolton has been merely a cloak to hide another identity, and that now he has gone back to that other identity. As Hiram Bolton he was playing a part, but now it is my belief that he has ceased to play a part and is only his natural self, and, therefore, you will find it exceedingly hard to discover him."

CHAPTER VII.

A WOMAN'S INTUITION.

Here was a suggestion that had not even occurred to the detective, and he pondered upon it in silence for a moment. Then, with some abruptness, he inquired:

"Have you met your husband's brother, Mrs. Bolton?"

"Yes. Frequently—that is to say, he has been here at the house several times. He and Hiram were never intimate."

"Will you tell me what you think of him?"

"I have thought him strangely like, and also strangely unlike his brother, Mr. Carter. Ralph Bolton is an entirely different type of man, and yet there are many things about him—little mannerisms mostly—in which he is strangely like Hiram. And that reminds me of an odd thing, Mr. Carter."

"What is that?"

"I do not remember that I ever saw the two brothers together."

"What is that? Not when Ralph Bolton was here to call upon you?"

"I recall now that it has always so happened that when Ralph Bolton has been here, Hiram has been absent. It would seem almost as if he timed his calls so that he would not meet his brother; and yet, I can remember, too, that he always asked for Hiram, as if he wanted to see him."

"Do I understand you that it is your wish that Hiram Bolton should not be sought?"

She shrugged her shoulders and thought a moment. Then she said:

"I don't think that I ought to permit it to make any difference to me, Mr. Carter, what you and Harry decide to do about the matter. Of course, he has his trust company to think about, and I should not permit personal considerations to enter into it. In any case, I shall, as soon as it is possible, apply for a divorce. I should have done so long ago, only for the appearance of it. But now—I shall not hesitate."

"Then I think the search will have to continue."

"As you please, sir."

"Is there any suggestion that you can make to me concerning it?"

"None whatever."

"It might be that among Mr. Bolton's private papers, here in the house, there would be found a clue or a suggestion——"

"You would find nothing," she interrupted him. "Hiram never kept anything about him or in his desk which could be called private or even personal. He was much too careful a man for that."

A footman entered the room bearing a card at that moment, and then stood waiting for his mistress to say whether she would receive the caller, or not. She turned to the detective and put the card in his hand. It bore the name of Ralph Bolton.

"What shall I say?" she asked the detective. "Shall I receive him?"

"I see no reason why not," replied Nick. "I would like it, however, if you would direct the footman to say nothing of my presence here."

"You hear what the gentleman says," she remarked to her servant. "You may show Mr. Bolton here, James."

Then, the instant that the footman left the room, Nick rose.

"Mrs. Bolton," he said, "may I be present at this interview without the knowledge of Ralph Bolton? I have met him to-day. I should like to hear what he has to say to you about his brother, without the restraint of my presence."

For reply she pointed toward a small alcove room at one end of the parlor, from which it was separated by heavy curtains.

"Step in there," she said; and the detective had barely time to make himself comfortable when Ralph Bolton entered the room where his sister-in-law was awaiting him.

He stepped forward briskly and with extended hand.

"Ruth, how are you?" he asked. "I suppose you are thoroughly surprised to see me, eh?"

"No. To tell you the truth, I have rather expected you, Ralph," she replied enigmatically.

"Expected me? How is that?" he asked.

"I have never known you to call upon me when your brother was not absent, and now that he is so thoroughly absent, of course, I expect you."

"That is hardly fair to say to me, is it, Ruth?"

"Perhaps not. But of course you know about the 'disappearance' of your brother?"

"Yes. Harry sent me word at once. I have been to the bank since I got the word, and I have had quite a talk with the detective who has taken up the case. That is why I have come here to see you to-night."

"Why?"

"To know if I could be of any service—really, to find out if Hiram had not already returned."

"No, he has not returned. I have no idea that he *will* return. You are strangely like him at times, Ralph."

"Yes, I know that. We are as alike as two peas about some things and as distant as the poles in others. What makes you think he won't return to you?"

"I think for one thing, that he had tired of me—that we had tired of each other, and that he had made up his mind to get out. For another, you may not have been told, he has robbed the company."

"Robbed—the—company?" There was no mistaking the surprised unbelief of this exclamation. "Are you sure about that?"

"Perfectly sure."

"The trust company?"

"Certainly."

"Why, your brother Harry told me this morning that——"

"I know, but it has been discovered differently since then. Hiram took about a million and a half of the bank's funds, altogether, I am told. He will scarcely care to return after that, do you think so?"

Ralph Bolton, with a visible effort, pulled himself together.

"I did not expect to receive such intelligence as that when I came here to see you," he said. "I would not have believed that Hiram was capable of doing a thing of that sort. But if it is true——"

"It is true."

"I was about to say, if it is true, then I think as you do, that there is very little hope that he will return. Do you think I ought to search for him, Ruth?"

"I think your own brotherly consideration should answer that question. Personally, I am rather glad he has gone, and I hope that he will not be found; but after all, it is a matter of indifference to me."

"I am afraid there wasn't much love between you and Hiram, Ruth."

"No, there never was that."

"Why in the world did you marry him?"

"For the same reason that we do many foolish things which later we regret. I was married to your brother eight years, Ralph—but I never learned to know him."

"No? That is strange."

"Shall I tell you something that I have in mind—at the risk of offending you?"

"You will not offend me. Yes, tell me what is on your mind."

"I have been convinced for some time past that Hiram was always playing a part; that he was never his real self with me; that he was another personage altogether, and that I only saw the surface of a personality he chose

to assume for my benefit, during the eight years I have lived with him."

"But isn't that absurd?"

"I don't think so. And now for the part of it that may offend you, Ralph."

"Well?"

"Is Hiram Bolton your own brother?"

"Certainly."

"Has he always borne the name of Hiram Bolton?"

"What a strange question to ask. Of course he has."

"Have you, all your lives, been associated with each other? I mean as closely as you have been since I have known you."

"We were never associated with each other, so to speak. We have never had anything in common. We have always avoided each other rather than sought each other—but if you mean, have we always been more or less in touch with each other, I can answer in the affirmative."

"Are Hiram Bolton and Ralph Bolton your true names, then?"

"Pardon me, Ruth, but what in the world has got into your head about us? How could we have been anything else than what we are? I am afraid that this affair has upset you more than you admit."

"It has upset me not at all, Ralph. I am—personally—rather glad that it has happened; I mean by that, glad that there is no further necessity for self-deception between your brother and me."

"Then what do you mean?"

"I mean that Hiram Bolton, your brother, has never been, on the surface, what he was underneath the surface. I mean that he has never been sincere—that from the very beginning of our acquaintance he has played a part. I did not realize it until—well, until possibly a year had passed after our marriage; but then I knew, and since that time I have never ceased to study him."

Nick, who was looking upon the scene through an opening in the curtains, saw that Ralph stirred uneasily in his chair at this direct charge against his brother, and he heard him murmur:

"It is all very preposterous, you know, Ruth."

"It is not preposterous, for the reason that it is true; and again, at the risk of offending you, I must say that more than once I have thought that you were in the secret."

"I? In what secret?"

"In the secret of your brother's impersonation, if you will have it that way. To tell you the truth, I don't believe that I am Mrs. Bolton at all. I mean by that, that I don't believe that Bolton was his right name—or yours. There! Now it is out."

"It would appear, Ruth"—he twirled his mustache and smiled at her, perfectly the master of himself—"that instead of risking offending me, as you expressed it, you are studiously attempting to do that very thing."

"No, I am not. I will be frank with you. I don't care much whether I offend you or not. Whatever happens, our acquaintance, which has never amounted to much, ends here to-night. But I want you to know that I think your brother has always been some sort of an impostor; just what sort of an impostor I do not know."

"And you class me in the same category?"

"I cannot avoid doing so. I believe that you know at this moment exactly where Hiram Bolton is."

Ralph Bolton shrugged his shoulders, but he made no reply. He did not attempt to admit or deny the impeachment.

"I think," he said after a moment, that it is unfortunate that I ventured to call upon you to-night. I came to offer such solace and assistance as I could. I find myself classed as an impostor and—oh, well! You are troubled and excited. You will forget all this after a little. I think you have my address, Ruth?"

"Yes. I have it."

"Please remember that if there should be anything at all in which I can be of service to you, I have only to be informed of it. Shall I say good night to you now?"

He was turning away when the door opened and Henry Horton appeared on the threshold; and the moment he appeared he called out:

"Hello, Ralph. I say, Ruth, what have you done with Carter?"

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER FINDS A PROMISING CLUE.

It did not please the detective at all to think that he was about to be discovered by Ralph Bolton, as a listener to the conversation that had just taken place, but the sudden appearance of Horton, followed by the direct question he had asked, seemed to leave no loophole for his escape from the predicament.

But he had not reckoned upon the quick wits of the woman.

He was on the point of stepping out from behind the curtains and showing himself, when he heard Ruth Bolton reply, as coolly as if she had been prepared for the question:

"Mr. Carter is not here, Harry. He left his apologies for you. I think he said something about seeing you at the office in the morning."

"What in the world was his big hurry?" demanded Horton impatiently.

"I did not ask him and he did not think it necessary to tell me," she replied.

"I am afraid that you and he did not hit it off very

well," said her brother; and she shrugged her shoulders, and replied:

"Possibly not."

In the meantime, Ralph Bolton had resumed his chair; and now he spoke.

"So Carter has been here to see you, has he?" he asked, directing the question at Mrs. Bolton.

"Harry brought him; yes," she replied.

"May I ask, Ruth, if you were as frank with him concerning your strange notion about Hiram as you have been with me?"

"I am not in the habit of taking outsiders into my confidence," she replied haughtily; and the answer seemed to satisfy him. He turned to Horton.

"What do you suppose is Ruth's idea of Hiram?" he asked, with a smile; for Nick could see that he was taking the attitude of regarding it as a sort of joke.

"I haven't an idea," replied Horton.

"Ruth charges us both with being impostors. She says that Hiram has never been what he should have been. She even doubts if his name was Bolton—that *my* name is Bolton. She has placed us both in the attitude of conspirators."

"You entirely misstate the case," she interrupted before her brother could reply. "What I said was that Hiram had always appeared to me as if he were playing a part; that I had no doubt that he *did* play a part, through all the years that he has known me; that I had no doubt that you were and are aware of that fact, and that also I had no doubt that you know at this moment where Hiram Bolton is hiding himself."

"*Ruth!*" expostulated her brother; but she raised her chin in the air and continued:

"I mean what I say. I have been the victim of some sort of a conspiracy—or, if not a victim, I have been made a catspaw. One is about as offensive to me as the other; and I wish you to know, Ralph Bolton, that whatever that conspiracy is, I think you are as deeply concerned in it as your brother. I believe that all this horseplay of yours and his about not liking each other, about having nothing in common, about avoiding each other, is and has been a bluff. You have done it altogether too well. If it weren't for the birthmark on Hiram's face and the difference in your build, one might almost suppose that you had been impersonating each other."

"You are talking very strangely and very wildly," said Ralph coolly.

She laughed in his face.

"There," she said, "you spoke exactly like Hiram. If my back had been turned, I could have sworn that it was Hiram who said it."

She wheeled around upon her brother.

"Harry," she demanded, "how long have you known Ralph Bolton?"

"I don't remember exactly. I think we met just before you and Hiram were married."

"Who introduced you to Ralph Bolton?"

"My recollection is that he introduced himself."

"Precisely. Now tell me, have you ever in your life seen him in the presence of his brother Hiram?"

"Why—let me see—really, I don't think I have."

"Do you remember that he was not at the wedding?"

"Perfectly. He wired us from somewhere——"

"The point is that he was not there. The point is that you nor I have never seen him in his brother's presence—we have never seen the two together in our lives. I don't believe that you can find anybody else who has done so, either."

She turned again upon Bolton, before he had a chance to speak.

"If that isn't evidence enough of subterfuge, Ralph Bolton, I don't know what is. I don't pretend to imagine what deep game you and your brother have been playing, or what you intended the end of it to be, but I believe there was a game—is one, if you like that better, and that you are as deep in the mud as he is in the mire."

Again she turned to her brother.

"Harry," she said, "tell me the truth. Did Hiram steal money from the trust company?"

"I am sorry to be compelled to admit to you that he did," was the slow reply.

"Then, Ralph Bolton, I believe that you know about that, too."

She started from her chair and rang the bell; and to the footman, who appeared almost instantly, she said:

"You will show Mr. Ralph Bolton to the door, James; and if he should call again I am not at home to him."

It was her brother who started forward now; Bolton stood perfectly still in the center of the room, with a strange smile on his handsome face. He saw that Horton was about to say something, and he waited for him to do it.

"Ruth," exclaimed Mrs. Bolton's brother, "what in the world is the matter with you to-night, my dear? You are talking and acting like a madwoman. I really wish——"

"We are waiting, Mr. Bolton, for you to go," she interrupted him. "When you have done that, my brother and I will continue this conversation at our leisure;" but now it was Horton's turn to be angry, and he turned squarely toward the door.

"Come along, Ralph," he said. "If you have to leave in this manner, I will go with you."

Mrs. Bolton stood like a statue in the middle of the room until she heard the street-door close, and then she turned, with a bright smile, toward the detective, who had stepped out from his place of concealment.

"You are a wonder," said Nick admiringly. "You certainly have got Ralph Bolton on the run."

"I despise him," she replied. "I always did. You

can never make me believe that he and his brother are not hand in glove. All that effort to avoid each other was too studied, too apparent. It would not surprise me at all if Hiram Bolton were concealed at his brother's apartment right now."

"My dear madam," said the detective, "I must congratulate you on some things that you said during that scene, for in saying them you gave me the one clue I needed in order to complete this case. I am quite sure now that, when the time comes, I will have no difficulty in putting my hand upon the shoulder of Hiram Bolton."

"You think as I do—that you will find him at his brother's home?"

"I think that he will be rather close to his brother all the time. I think that Ralph will lead me directly to him eventually. I wish you would tell me, are the voices of the two men very much alike?"

"Very much indeed—and yet quite different, too."

"Do you think you could describe that difference to me so that I would understand it?"

"I think so."

"Well?"

"There was always a slight hesitancy in Hiram's speech; there was also a lisp which was more noticeable some times than others. Ralph's voice is deeper and more musical than Hiram's—but the two have many gestures and mannerisms in common."

"Is it true, Mrs. Bolton, that you have never seen the two men together?"

"Quite true."

"Ralph did not even attend your wedding?"

"No; we got a wire from Boston, I think it was, to the effect that he could not possibly get to us."

"Did not Hiram eventually introduce Ralph to you?"

"No."

"Will you tell me how you did meet?"

"Hiram asked his brother to dine with us upon our return from the wedding-trip, which was a very short one. He wrote a note and mailed it to Ralph, asking him to come to us the following evening, which I remember was a Friday."

"And did he not come?"

"Yes. He came. But it happened that Hiram was detained by some directors' meeting that evening, and could not get home. He sent a note up to me by a messenger-boy to that effect. It came, I remember, soon after Ralph had put in an appearance, and we had introduced ourselves to each other."

Nick nodded his head with emphasis.

"It is all working out very beautifully," he said.

"What is, Mr. Carter?"

"The idea that I have for the solution of this mystery; the idea that you gave me."

"Do you mean that you think you see through their schemes now?"

"Yes. Perfectly."

"I wish you would tell me about it, please."

"Not just yet, Mrs. Bolton, if you will excuse me. Later, when I am a little bit more certain of my premises, I will do so. I suppose it has never occurred to you to wonder what the real cause could have been for those two brothers to avoid each other so religiously?"

"Indeed it has; often. But I never have been able to answer the question satisfactorily."

"Are you absolutely positive that you have never seen the two men together?"

"Absolutely so."

"And are you sure that you can think of no place where they have been seen in each other's company?"

"I am sure."

"There must have been many occasions during the last eight years when you have entertained here in your house and when Ralph Bolton has been invited?"

"Certainly."

"Has he never put in an appearance at those functions?"

"Never but once, and then Hiram was absent."

"Aren't there other houses where both brothers were invited?"

"Yes, many of them."

"And have they never been together at any of them?"

"Not to my knowledge. Their avoidance of each other seemed always to me to be absolutely studied; seemed arranged with a premeditated care that obviated all chance of accidental meetings between them."

The detective nodded again.

"I have often heard Hiram say, 'I saw Ralph to-day, and he said so and so,' and two or three times when Ralph has been here, he has told me that he just left Hiram at the office, or elsewhere, and that he would be along home presently; but the fact remains that he never came, at least until Ralph had been gone at least half an hour. Looking back upon it now, I can see very plainly that it was all studied—carefully studied."

"And that very fact," said Nick, "supplies the one clue that I wanted."

"I wish you would tell me what it is, Mr. Carter."

"Later, my dear madam; later I will do so," replied the detective.

CHAPTER IX.

NICK CARTER'S ASTOUNDING THEORY.

The detective found Chick awaiting him when he returned to his home that night.

"That was a good move, Chick, my going to call upon Mrs. Hiram Bolton," he said, when they were seated in the study with their cigars alight. "I think I have hit upon about as remarkable an idea for the solution of this problem as ever came my way yet."

"What is it?" asked the assistant.

"You will remember that just before Horton called here for me I told you to begin at the date of Hiram Bolton's connection with the trust company, and to go back over his past life just as far and just as thoroughly as it could be done."

"Yes."

"And in the meantime I was to cultivate Ralph Bolton. Well, Chick, we will stick to that plan, but my present idea is that we will both end up at the same spot."

"Eh? You think that the brothers are together?"

"Chick, I have begun to think that there are no brothers at all."

"No brothers? What——"

"I have about made up my mind that Ralph Bolton is Hiram Bolton, and that Hiram Bolton is Ralph Bolton. Don't you see the point?"

"Do you mean that—*that it is one man, and has been one man all the time?*"

"That is precisely what I mean."

"Are you sure about it, Nick?"

"No, I am not sure about it by a long shot, but I do feel more than half-assured of it."

"Tell me why you think so, Nick."

"Well, when I stop to think about it, there are a great many reasons why I think so, and there doesn't seem to be one really good reason why I should not think so."

"I thought Hiram was a much bigger and older man than Ralph?"

He is described as being heavier, but you know as well as I that it would not be at all difficult to add the appearance of weight to one's figure. The cut of one's clothing would almost, if not quite, do that, even without any other aids."

"Yes."

"They are described as being the same height, only that Hiram has a stoop in his shoulders. That is very easily assumed, you know."

"Certainly."

"Hiram's hair is turning gray over the temples; his mustache is also getting gray. His brother's hair and mustache are coal-black, as his is, where it is not gray. Now, it isn't any easy matter to make coal-black hair look as if it were streaked with gray—I mean for a steady thing, living in the house with an observant woman."

"No."

"But it is a dead easy thing to change coal-black hair that *is* streaked with gray, so that it looks as if it were *all* coal-black."

"Go on. I am getting interested."

"Hiram is described to me as having a pronounced lisp; also his voice is described as resembling his brother's save that Ralph's voice is musical where Hiram's is not. Now the lisp and the alteration in the voice would both be produced by the introduction under the tongue of a little silver bulb of the size of a dime. You know that."

"Yes."

"The point is that there isn't a difference between the two men, that I can find, which could not be wrought—which could not be made up, in fact, in five minutes' time."

"Still——"

"Wait a minute. Hiram and Ralph have both given out, time after time, that he and his brother had nothing in common; that they avoided each other. The fact is that the two were never seen together by anybody."

"Not even at Hiram's house? Not even at his wedding, for instance? Did you think to ask about that?"

"Not at his house. Not at his wedding. Not at a dinner to which Ralph was invited when Hiram and his bride returned from their wedding-tour. Ralph went to the dinner, but Hiram was detained and could not get there."

"Isn't there supposed to be a birthmark on Hiram's face?"

"Yes; but how long would it take you to manufacture a beautiful birthmark with a little red sheet rubber—one that wouldn's wash off? One that wouldn't come off at all until you applied cocoa-butter to it? How long would it take you to do that if it had to be done, and you had the material ready at home?"

"Perhaps twenty minutes, or half an hour."

"And once it was manufactured and ready for use, over and over again, how long would it take you to adjust it, if it were in your pocket ready?"

"Possibly a minute; maybe two."

"Exactly. You see there is nothing about the make-up of Hiram Bolton that Ralph Bolton could not accomplish in an incredibly short time; and if you care to turn the thing around, if Hiram wished to transpose himself into Ralph——"

"It could be done in the jerk of a lamb's tail."

"Sure thing."

"What are you going to do about it, Nick?"

"I don't know yet. I want to be mighty sure before I make the break. You see, if I am correct, one would hardly credit Bolton with the assurance he showed tonight."

"What was that?"

"Ralph Bolton came to call upon his sister-in-law while I was there. It was what she said to me before he came and what she said to him later on that put me next to this idea."

"If Hiram and Ralph are one and the same, he certainly did show his cheek when he went to that house, didn't he?"

"Yes; but remember that if both Boltons are the same man, he has been playing a double part for at least eight years. The wife of Hiram has become accustomed to thinking of her brother-in-law Ralph. But she knows that there is a nigger in the fence somewhere. She has had vague suspicions for a long time. She has sensed the idea that her husband has been playing a part. She accused Ralph to-night of traveling under a name that was not his own, and she accused him of knowing where Hiram Bolton is now."

"But suppose that your suspicions are all true—suppose that it is the fact that Hiram Bolton and Ralph Bolton are the same man, what has been the object of the masquerade?"

"The object? That is easy enough."

"Well?"

"The object has been to step out, just as he has done, when he should be ready to do so; and in stepping out, to take with him all the money he could lay his hand upon. I suppose when Hiram married Ruth Horton he thought that he would manage somehow to get her fortune into his hands also, so that he could make away with that. He has been unable to accomplish that, but he has managed to feather his nest in other ways, to say nothing of the million and a half that he has taken from the bank."

"I see," said Chick. "He has all along provided the second character, so that he could step into it at any time."

"No. It was the second character, as you call it, who married Ruth Horton. The real character is Ralph Bolton, the sport. The assumed character is Hiram Bolton, the conservative man, the banker and financier."

Chick nodded.

"When the time came for Hiram to disappear, he had only to throw aside the assumed character and disappear—and there you are."

"Very clever, I call it."

"Clever? It is more than clever. The really clever part of it consists in his having played the game for so long a time that nobody but a couple of ferrets like you and me would ever think of questioning it. He has kept the two characters alive—that is, always supposing that my theory is correct—he has kept the two characters going for about ten years. Think of it. Think what that means, Chick!"

"I am thinking of it."

"And right here, Chick, another and a different element enters into the affair."

"What is that?"

"In my talk with Ralph yesterday, he told me that he was married—had been married about six months. There may be a touch of bigamy connected with this thing yet."

"With an innocent woman as the victim. I hate those things, Nick."

"So do I. Anyhow, we have got to begin our campaign to-morrow morning, in earnest."

"You mean that I am to do what you have already told me, and that you——"

"Yes; and I will adopt some sort of disguise—I don't know what it will be yet—and in the character I assume I will make the acquaintance of Ralph Bolton."

"You say he is a gambler——"

"Ralph Bolton is an all-round sport. He follows the races where he can. If he *is* playing double as I suspect, it has been a little difficult for him to do it regularly, for there was the bank to attend to; but he has done it just the same. It is the gambler and the sport who is the real man in this affair; the other chap, the banker, has no existence, and I expect that he is awfully glad to get rid of him."

"I wonder where he got his money to make his start, Nick?"

"Who can tell that? Doubtless he made a big winning some time or other, and with that he made the dip into really respectable circles. You see, as Ralph Bolton he could not have done that, for Ralph Bolton already had a name as a sport; but as Hiram Bolton he could do anything. And it is an easy matter to make sixty or a hundred thousand dollars appear like six hundred thousand if only one has the nerve.

"And then, Chick, once started among financial men, the rest was comparatively easy for him. Once he had that trust company organized he was thoroughly on his feet, no matter how little real capital he possessed himself. He had the funds of the institution back of him, and the prestige and credit that go with such an outfit."

"Sure."

"And all the time he had only to keep feathering Ralph Bolton's nest with a little more and a little more, waiting

for the opportunity to steal a million or two and then to lose that chap Hiram forever."

"How he must have been laughing in his sleeve at all of you while you have been talking with him about the disappearance of Hiram."

"Mind you," said Nick, "I am not certain that I am right about this. There is a possibility that I may be mistaken. There may be two Boltons after all."

"It would hardly seem so now."

"All the same, there may be. I may be all wrong. Only, if there *are* two Boltons, I am satisfied that Ralph knows where Hiram is."

"But I don't believe there are two—now. Not since what you have said about it."

"Neither do I. I wish it were not so late."

"Why?"

"Because, if it were not, I should feel tempted to go to his house and make a call upon him to-night. I confess that I am very anxious to see the inside of his house."

"It is almost eleven o'clock now, Nick."

"Yes. I know. It is out of the question for to-night. My only fear is that Ralph may take it into his head to take a trip abroad before we have a chance to complete this investigation. If my suspicions are correct, Mrs. Hiram Bolton must have startled him by some of the things she said to him to-night—and being startled, it may occur to him to get away for a while. However, we won't worry about that now. Good night, Chick."

"Good night."

And so they parted to await the events of the coming day.

CHAPTER X.

NICK CARTER STEALS A MARCH.

The idea that had taken possession of the detective—that there never had in reality been any Hiram Bolton at all; that Hiram Bolton the banker was merely Ralph Bolton the sport in disguise—interested him.

Of course, if he accepted the theory he must also give the man who played these two parts credit for wonderful foresight, and for a steadfastness of purpose, even in his wrong-doing, which was most remarkable.

It seemed almost incredible on the face of it that a man could have and would have laid his plans so carefully so many years ahead—and then have lived up to them as this man must have done, to carry out the plans so perfectly that no person ever suspected the subterfuge.

The question naturally presented itself, why had he undertaken the scheme originally? What had been his motive at the inception of such a plot?

Plainly, the answer was, wealth.

Realizing that he was a gambler and a sport and that he was widely known as such, the man had doubtless been wise enough to know that a leopard cannot change its spots, and that he therefore could never hope to break into the "sacred" circles he hoped to attain, so long as he was Ralph Bolton.

But there was no reason why Ralph Bolton should not have a brother, nor was there any good reason why that brother should not be the antithesis of the sporty man.

The brother could be sanctimonious; he could even, in part, repudiate his gambler brother; he could mix with the men of Wall Street, with the dollars that he had amassed as a gambler, and little by little he could break into the financial circles where he hoped to get.

Perhaps, if he played his part thoroughly well, there might be a rich marriage for him; a marriage by which he could get his hands upon many millions; literally for him a marriage of convenience, for if the time ever came when he should tire of that wife—after he had possessed himself of her fortune or the greater part of it—it would only be necessary for him to have Hiram disappear.

This is the manner in which the detective thought it out.

Going back over the years that had elapsed since Hiram first made his appearance in the Street. Nick could figure out just how one thing after another had happened to push along the original plans, and to make it all the more worth the player's while that he should persevere.

That the man had failed to secure possession of his wife's fortune was due, no doubt, to the misgivings of that same wife and to the sagacity of her banker brother.

But he had succeeded in feathering his nest in another way; he had stolen a million and a half in cash from the funds of the trust company.

Doubtless there was as much more which he had managed to pass over to the keeping of his other self during those years, so it was safe to say that he had a fund—and probably a cash fund at that—of from three to four million dollars.

And then that expression, so oft repeated and which had struck him as significant each time he heard it, recurred to the detective; that expression of "six months ago."

"Six months ago" seemed to be the turning-point in the career of Hiram Bolton.

Ralph Bolton had told Nick that he had been married six months ago, secretly; Mrs. Hiram Bolton had told Nick that it was six months ago that she really became suspicious of her husband; and there were other expressions which figured upon the same basis of time.

In this Nick saw an additional incentive for Ralph Bolton to decide that it was time for "Hiram" Bolton to disappear.

Doubtless he had met and had fallen in love with another woman—but he had done this as Ralph Bolton; and without doubt the man had played the double part so long a time that he had grown to regard them as distant personalities himself.

And so, without a thought as to the possible consequences, he committed bigamy, believing firmly that the crime would never be discovered; believing firmly that he had only to let Hiram disappear, to have the man given up for dead—to have him a fugitive from justice, while all the time he would be with the men who were seeking him, advising with them, and keeping up the part of the sporty brother to the end of the game.

But he had not taken sufficiently into account the unnatural astuteness of a woman who has been both wronged and scorned.

The cool exterior, and calm self-possession of his wife, Ruth, had deceived him as to her qualities of understanding. She had been wiser than he thought, and although she had not guessed the real truth, she had aimed so near it as to startle him, doubtless—certainly she had aimed near enough to make the one suggestion which the detective needed to put him on the right track.

After Nick had gone to his room that night he went over every one of these considerations with care and with deliberation; and the result was that by the time slumber came to him he had decided firmly in his own mind that the theory was the correct one, and that he would act upon it.

It is one thing to be reasonably convinced of a thing, but it is quite another thing to prove it to be true.

If he should arrest Ralph Bolton at once, as being the Hiram Bolton who had stolen the money, Ralph Bolton would only laugh at him.

Doubtless there would be a thousand men upon whom he could call to prove that he was no other than Ralph Bolton—and their oaths to that effect would cover a period of ten years, which would be sufficient to convince any court in the world.

And it was not at all likely that now, after "Hiram" had definitely disappeared, that Ralph would keep about him any of the incriminating impediment of his other character.

When the detective arose in the morning he looked first at the card which Ralph had given him—and then in a flash it came to him that he would call boldly at the gambler's home some time during the day. He did not know why, but he felt that somehow he would find the solution of his difficulties there.

And he made the call in his own proper person, arriving there at the apartment-house in which Ralph lived, a little after eleven o'clock in the morning.

Inquiries at the desk in the office elicited the fact that Mr. Bolton had left the house about an hour earlier—which was exactly what the detective had wished would be the case.

He asked that his card be taken to Mrs. Bolton, upon which he wrote the phrase: "Concerning your husband's brother."

Word came down presently that she would receive him, and after a little while he was ushered into the parlor of one of the most expensive suites in the building.

And it was a beautiful woman who presently came to him. A woman of thirty, possibly, with big, wide, innocent, baby-blue eyes; with a wealth of flaxen hair such as only the Swedes are known to have; with a perfect figure faultlessly gowned, and with the air of a princess, or the chief lady at a court function.

She came part way across the room toward the detective and stopped; then she smiled brightly upon him and said:

"I am exceedingly sorry, sir, that my husband is not here. Will you tell me in what way I can serve you?"

She still held the card he had sent to her, in her hand, and now she looked down at it again, as if the name upon it had slipped her memory.

"I was trying to think," she continued, before he had an opportunity to answer her, "what it is that makes your name seem familiar to me. I remember now."

"Yes?" replied Nick, smiling back at her. He was accustomed to reading character almost at the sight of a face, and now, like a flash it came to him that she was overdoing the part she had elected to play, just a little. If she had said at once that she remembered the name, or if she had not made that elaborate pretense of forgetting it for the moment, Nick would not have had a suspicion against her; as it was he said to himself: "I believe this woman is wise to the whole game."

"You are the detective," she went on, "who is trying to find out what has become of poor Hiram."

"Did you know your brother-in-law?" asked the detective instantly; and he added mentally that here was another break. She replied:

"I could hardly say that I know him—that I ever knew him. My husband introduced him to me on the street one day, rather more than a year ago. That is the only time I ever saw him to speak to him; although I have *seen* him since that time."

"A year ago was before you were married, was it not?" asked the detective.

"Yes. What was it that you wished to see me about, Mr. Carter?"

"Well, you know, I really came to see your husband," he replied. "I had an idea that possibly Hiram might have communicated with him in some way—and when I found that Ralph was not at home, it occurred to me that if there was any message, you would know about it."

"I would know about it if there had been one, but I am quite sure there has not," she replied.

"Could you tell me—could you give me any idea where I might find your husband at this hour of the day?"

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed prettily.

"He is a difficult man to find," she said, as if the fact were a constant annoyance to her. "Sometimes when I want him I have to telephone all over the city before I locate him. More than likely he would be around one of the big hotels; the Waldorf, the Astor, the Knickerbocker—really, I haven't any more idea about it than you have."

"Will you tell him when he returns that I called, please?"

"Certainly."

"And that I would like to see him when he can make it convenient. He might call me up, you know."

"Yes."

"Does he seem very much cut up over the disappearance of his brother, madam?"

"I really think he does, Mr. Carter. He tries to conceal the fact, but I can see that it troubles him. Shall I tell him that you will call again?"

"No; not without an appointment. Thank you."

Nick bowed himself out of the apartment, and the moment the door was closed he hurried to the elevator with all speed, and as soon as he arrived at the ground floor he hastened to the telephone exchange of the building.

It was in charge of a young woman with molasses-candy hair, and, fortunately for Nick's plans, there was no one near at the moment.

He laid a ten-dollar bill on the desk in front of her, and he said rapidly:

"This is yours, young lady, if you will do me a very slight favor."

She looked up rather startled; but the smile in the detective's eyes was reassuring.

"What is it you want me to do?" she asked him.

"Has there been a telephone-call for Apartment 99 within the last five minutes?" he asked.

"No."

"Then there will be one in a very few moments. Possibly that is it now."

"But what do you wish me to do?" she asked again, with her hand on the plug.

"I want you, as soon as you make the connection that is asked for, to let me have your receiver. It is very important that I should hear what is said."

"But, sir——"

"There will be no harm done, and nobody will ever know anything about it. I am not seeking to wrong any person, but I am trying to right a very great wrong. Will you help me?"

"Yes," she replied, "I will;" and a moment later she gave a receiver into the detective's hand; and the next instant Nick heard the voice of Mrs. Ralph Bolton say:

"Call him to the phone at once. Say that it is his wife, and that it is important."

CHAPTER XI.

THE TELEPHONE AS A WITNESS.

There was a moment's wait after that and then came the well-remembered voice of Ralph Bolton, saying:

"Hello! Hello! Is that you, Hermia?"

"Yes, Ralph. I have just had a call which I think you ought to know about," she replied.

"Who was that, Hermia?"

"You know; the man who is looking for—for your brother."

"Oh! The detective, you mean?"

"Yes."

"What did he want?"

"I don't really know. He pretended that he wanted to see you and he left word that I was to tell you that he called. I think he came only on a general snooping expedition, to find out if there was anything to find out, you know."

"Yes. I know."

"I thought you ought to be informed about it at once."

"That is right, Hermia. Did you see him?"

"Yes."

"And talk with him?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what he asked you. Try to remember every question he asked you?"

"I don't think he really asked but one, and that was if I knew Hiram."

"What did you say to him about it?"

"I told him that you introduced me to your brother on the street about a year ago, and although I had seen him since that time, it was the only time I ever exchanged a word with him."

"Humph! Well, that won't do any harm. What in blazes did he mean by going to see you, I wonder? He must have known that I would not likely be there at this time of the day."

"I think he wanted to ask me that very question. I am afraid, Ralph, that he has some suspicion about things."

"Nonsense! At the most he only thinks I know where Hiram is in hiding. I wish you had told him where to find me."

"I told him that you were probably at one of the big hotels. I shouldn't wonder if he made the rounds of them in search of you. You must remember, dear, that I know something about this same Nick Carter——"

"Hush! No names. Go on."

"You must remember that I know something about him, through my sister, although this is the first time I ever saw him. I do wish, Ralph, that you would hurry and get things straightened out so that we could go away until this thing blows over."

"That, my dear, is exactly what I am busy about at the present time. I think it would be a good idea if you would meet me here at two o'clock. Leave the house at half-past one, and be here at two, precisely. Will you do that?"

"Yes. Do you want me to bring anything?"

"No. I will send a note up to you in the meantime by messenger, with instructions. After that I will be waiting for you at the usual entrance, at two o'clock. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"I think it will be just as well if we are not too much in evidence around here for a week or so. However, I will have my plans all laid by the time I see you."

"And in the meantime you will send me a note with instructions?"

"Yes. I will write it now and send it at once."

"All right. Good-by."

Nick gave the receiver back to the operator.

"Now, if you will tell me just where that call was——" he said, smiling.

"You mean who it was that the lady called?"

"I mean where was the other end of the wire?"

"At the Hotel Mammoth."

"Thank you very much. You must not worry about this affair at all, young lady. It was very important that I should hear that conversation. It is a mighty good thing for all concerned that I did hear it. And for the rest, I have forgotten that you or I ever did such a thing."

"I would rather not take this ten dollars, sir. It seems like bribery," she said tentatively.

"On the contrary," replied Nick, "it is merely pay for services rendered; and he hurried away before she could raise any further objections.

The subway whirled him to the Hotel Mammoth in a very short time. He was resolved now to abandon his original purpose of making Ralph Bolton's acquaintance in disguise. He felt that there was not time for that, for he understood well enough by what Ralph had said to his wife over the telephone that the fellow was contemplating flight that very day.

According to Nick's idea, Bolton must still be engaged in writing that letter of instruction to his wife, for it

was yet scarcely fifteen minutes since he listened to the conversation over the phone; and accordingly he sought his man in the writing-room.

He was there; and he was so busily engaged over his letter that he did not raise his eyes when the detective entered the room and passed close to him; but it was no part of Nick's purpose to interrupt him until the letter was finished and despatched, so he selected a seat at another desk and pretended to be busily engaged upon a letter himself.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Bolton complete and seal the letter, address it and then press the electric button at his side; and when the call was answered, he ordered that a messenger-boy be sent to him at once.

When the boy appeared Bolton said to him:

"Do you see the address on that envelope, my son?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, put the letter inside your pocket. Take it to that address and deliver it. Wait for an answer and bring the answer back here to me at this desk—or at least, in this room. Here is a dollar for your trip up there, and when you have brought me the answer you shall have two more. Now, go."

It was not until the boy had left the room that it appeared to occur to Bolton to look around him. Nick was rather amazed at this, for a criminal rarely lets any person come near to him or enter a room where he is, without sizing that person up rather carefully. But now Bolton turned half-way around in his chair, and while he lighted a cigar his eyes flashed from one person to another who was there until at last they settled with something of a start upon Nick Carter.

Nick was apparently deeply engrossed in what he was writing, and he did not raise his head until he felt a light touch upon his shoulder. Bolton had crossed the room to his side and was standing there now, smiling down upon the detective.

"Hello, Carter!" he said genially. "How long have you been here?"

"Only a few minutes. Why?"

"Didn't you see me when you came in? I was over there at that desk writing."

"Yes. I saw you; but you appeared to be busy—and I had a letter of my own to write."

"I have just been talking over the telephone with my wife, Carter. She told me that you were there a little while ago and wanted to see me."

"Yes?" said Nick. "That is quite true, although it was not at all important. You see, Bolton, I can't get it out of my head that you know where your brother is. Mind you, I don't wish to give any offense, but——"

"Look here, Carter, I won't take offense, since you don't mean it; but I wish you would understand once for all that there was nothing at all in common between Hiram and me, and that I have no more idea where he is now than you have. In fact I would be the very last man in the world whom he would inform of that interesting fact. He may be a guest of this house right now, for all I know to the contrary."

Nick nodded.

"I'll tell you another thing, Carter—I don't mind telling you because I think you will understand and appreciate my motives."

"What is it?"

"I am going to get out of this for a time."

"Get out of this? What do you mean?"

"I mean that I am going away. I am going to take my wife for a trip somewhere. There isn't anything particular doing in my line just now, and I can get away just as well as not."

"Have you decided where you will go?"

"No; I haven't. I have just written a note to my wife to tell her to get ready, and to select a place where she would like to go. I think it will be to Mexico."

"Do you contemplate making the start to-day?"

"No. Good gracious, no! A woman could not get ready for a long trip in so short a time. But I think we will get away to-morrow or the day following."

"Do you think, Bolton, that it is wise for you to go just now?"

"I can't imagine why it is not wise. I don't want to be bothered with all this fuss in which my brother has got himself mixed up."

"Some suspicion of complicity with him may attach to you if you run away at this particular time."

Bolton threw back his head and laughed aloud.

"That is utter nonsense, of course," he said. "I have had no more to do with his affairs than you have—in fact, you are having a great deal more to do with them just now than I ever did. Suspicion? Oh, well, I could stand that, I guess."

"I am told that you called upon Hiram's wife last evening," said Nick.

"Yes. And a jolly time I had of it, I don't think! Between you and me I don't blame Hiram for flying the coop. Ruth is a handsome woman, all right, but for a steady diet I think she'd have me in a sanitarium in about two weeks. By the way, you had been there just before I got there, I understood."

"Yes."

"What do *you* think of her, Carter? On the level, now."

"I think as you say, that she is a very handsome woman; and more than that, she impresses me as being an unusually smart woman, as well."

"Oh, she's smart, all right. She is too confoundedly smart, if it comes down to cases. Is that messenger-boy waiting for you, Carter?"

"Yes." Nick called the boy to him and gave him the letter he had written. "Deliver that as quickly as possible," he said. "There will be no answer." Then he turned again to his companion.

If Ralph Bolton could have seen the contents of that letter he would have been disturbed. It was a short note and was addressed to Chick. It read:

"Go to the Croydon apartments a little before half-past one o'clock. R. B. and his wife occupy Apartment 99. At about half-past one Mrs. Ralph will leave the house to go down-town. As soon as she is out of the apartment, I want you to find a way to enter it and search it—search it for any papers or articles which might possibly connect Ralph with Hiram. Do the job as quickly as you can, and as soon as it is done call up Joseph, at home, and ask him for orders. I will have directed him in the meantime what to say to you."

That was all; but it meant a great deal.

It might be that Chick would not be able to enter the apartment at all; it might be that if he did so he would be discovered by one of the servants.

But the point was that Nick was satisfied that Ralph Bolton intended to leave the city, and no doubt the country, that afternoon, and he wanted, if possible, to find a way to stop him. Whether that was possible depended largely upon what Chick could accomplish.

CHAPTER XII.

NICK CARTER TAKES A GREAT BIG CHANCE.

All this time the detective had been vainly turning over in his mind, in search of an explanation, a remark that Hermia Bolton had made over the telephone to Ralph. It was:

"You must remember that I know something about this Nick Carter—you must remember that I know something about him through my sister."

"Who, then, is Hermia Bolton? Or rather, who was she before she assumed the name of Hermia Bolton?" he asked himself over and over, but he could find no satisfactory answer.

He was positive that he had never seen her before, for a face once seen by Nick Carter was never forgotten. Nor could he recall any person of whom her features reminded him.

There was one thing evident to the detective, however, and that was that Hermia was not in the affair of the Boltons blindfolded. It was evident that she knew just as much about the plot that had been planned and carried out, as Ralph Bolton himself—and therefore it was also evident that she belonged to, or at least was closely associated with, the under world. There could be no doubt of that.

Nick thought of those baby-blue eyes; of that perfect figure; of that charming smile and manner, and of the soft, evenly modulated voice and wondered if he had ever seen and heard them before and forgotten them.

But he knew that could not be true; he knew also that if Hermia did have a sister who was or had been known to him, there could be no resemblance between the two, else he would have recognized it.

Suddenly it occurred to Nick that, although he had sent orders to Chick to go up to the apartment-house and to search the rooms, he had said nothing at all about keeping tabs on Hermia. He had, in fact, thought that it would be ample time to do that when she should meet Ralph at the hotel entrance.

But now another idea came to him. Put into words it was this:

"Hermia is the custodian of that money, of course. She has got upward of a million dollars in cash to bring with her when she comes away from that apartment. That is really what the letter is about. Of course."

He looked at his watch and saw that it was almost half-past twelve; he felt that he had a good solid hour in which to carry out a plan that had come to him.

"So long, Bolton," he said hastily. "I hope you'll have a pleasant trip," and without waiting for a reply he left

Bolton staring at him, and hurried out of the room and out of the hotel, too, as rapidly as he could go without attracting attention.

Outside he jumped into a cab and had himself driven rapidly to his own house, where he told cabby to wait for him.

"I may not come out myself," he said rather enigmatically," but there is a friend of mine here who will want the cab in about ten minutes."

He hurried into the house and to his study, and there, as rapidly as he could work, he began adjusting a simple disguise—simple though perfect—of which he knew that he could divest himself at a moment's notice.

It was a faultlessly attired Frenchman who descended the steps and entered the cab, and who directed that he be driven at once to the up-town entrance of the subway; and there Nick paid the cabby and hurried below, where he took the train for the Croydon apartments.

It was a quarter-past one when he entered the building, and one of the first persons he saw was Chick, who was evidently waiting until the time should come for him to carry out the orders he had received.

Nick did not make himself known. That was not a part of his plan; but he strolled up and down the corridor for a few moments, gradually drawing nearer and nearer to the elevator, and presently he slipped into it and ascended to the floor on which Apartment 99 was located.

Here he again took to strolling up and down the corridor, waiting for Hermia to appear; nor had he long to wait, for presently she came out accompanied by a tall and angular maid, who carried a dress-suit case in one hand and a Gladstone bag in the other.

Instantly the detective stepped forward. The moment for action had come.

He knew—he thought he knew positively—that the money stolen from the trust company was in one of those receptacles; either in the suit-case or in the bag.

Before they could close the door of the apartment, he had stepped quickly forward and, with every appearance of breathless haste, he exclaimed:

"Thank Heaven I am in time. You are Madam Bolton—no? Yes. Quick, madam. There is no time to lose. Your husband sent me to you. Ah! These are the satchels to which he referred—yes."

He leaned forward and dexterously removed both grips from the care of the maid before the astonished woman could realize what he was doing. Then, with them tightly grasped in his own hands, he bent toward Hermia and in a hoarse whisper said:

"You are to follow me. You are to appear unconcerned. Nick Carter is after Ralph to arrest him. He has had to alter his plans at the last moment. He dare not come here himself, for even now there is a detective sent by Nick Carter, down-stairs awaiting the possible arrival of Ralph."

"But, sir, I do not know you. Who——"

"Hush madam! It is enough that I am your husband's friend, is it not? Enough that he relies upon me. He could not come himself. He sent me. I am here. You are to follow. I have a carriage all ready. The place of meeting which Ralph fixed had to be changed. Now he has gone directly to the steamer. We are to go there. Come."

He had worked the two woman toward the elevator while he was talking and now it stopped to receive them. It was manifestly impossible to continue the discussion in the presence of the other people on the elevator, and so they descended to the ground floor in silence.

There Nick gave them no opportunity to question him. He was aware that Hermia was thoroughly frightened; he was aware also that she was keeping close watch of the two bags he was carrying so carelessly.

But Nick led the way rapidly out of the house and to the edge of the curb, where the carriage he had already engaged was awaiting him; and as he had already given the driver his instructions, he had only to call out to him now: "Drive fast."

In an instant the vehicle was in rapid motion and it whirled swiftly around a corner upon one of the side streets, almost as soon as they were seated; and here, when Hermia leaned forward toward him and would have spoken, he interrupted what she would have said by saying:

"I must see if we are followed;" and then he leaned out of the window and pretended to look back.

It was not five minutes later when the carriage drew up sharply in front of the police station-house, and Nick, with the two satchels in his hands, leaped out the instant it came to a standstill.

Hermia Bolton followed and had reached the pavement before she realized where she was; and then she drew back with a sudden cry of alarm.

"What does this mean?" she gasped, turning white to the lips.

"It means, madam, that you and your maid are under arrest," replied Nick coolly; at the same time dexterously removing the mustache, the imperial, and the wig that had disguised him so effectually. "If you will step quietly inside, and into the captain's room, you will save yourself a great deal of annoyance."

"But this is an outrage, sir! This is——"

"This is the fortune of war, madam."

The captain of that precinct, who was well known to Nick, had come out upon the steps in the meantime, and now Nick motioned to him and to two policemen who were beside him.

"Captain," he said, "may I take these ladies to your private office before I make a charge against them?" And with white but sullen faces, the two were led in silence into the station-house and to the captain's private room, where the door was closed so that only the two women and the captain and Nick were present.

"Now, madam," said the detective, "I know perfectly well what these receptacles contain. But it is my duty to make sure. Will you supply the keys, or shall I cut them open?"

In utter silence she produced the keys and handed them to him; and as silently he opened the suit-case and the bag. *Both were literally crammed full of money.*

"You see, Madam Hermia," said Nick, "that although you and Ralph have played the game fairly well, you lose the thirteenth trick just the same. It's too bad, for I think you intended having a fine time spending that money. Captain, may I ask you to take good care of these two prisoners until I return? And the suit-case and bag, will you hold the keys until I ask for them? Thank you. You may expect me back inside of an hour."

"But I say, Carter! Where are you going? What shall I do with these women?"

"Lock them up until I return—on a charge of petit larceny."

"Petit larceny! I should think they had robbed the United States Treasury."

"Lock them up, anyhow. And take good care of that dough. I'll be back inside of an hour."

He was out of the station and away before the captain could stop him; and it was exactly ten minutes after two o'clock when he walked into the Hotel Mammoth and found Ralph Bolton standing at the entrance awaiting the arrival of Hermia.

Without a word of warning Nick walked straight up to him, seized him, turned him around as if he were on a pivot, and snapped handcuffs on his wrists behind him before he could do a thing to prevent it; and then he said sharply:

"It will only make things worse, Bolton, if you make a scene here. I know that you are Hiram Bolton, as well as Ralph, so you see the game is up."

Bolton was either too paralyzed to offer any resistance, or he did not think it worth the while, for he went quietly to the carriage with the detective and climbed inside.

"Hermia and the woman who acts as maid for her are prisoners, and I have all the money," Nick told him as soon as they were seated. "This is Horton's case, not mine, and I expect he means to let it go lightly with you. You can fix that with him the best way you can. All I want you to do for me now is to confess at once that you are Hiram Bolton. It will save me some trouble and you some years in prison if you do it."

"What's the use of denying it, Carter?" was the reply. "This is your rubber—but we will play another before we are quits."

"All right," said Nick. "Any time you're ready."

* * * * * * *

That is the end of the story. From the police-station Nick telephoned for Chick, who had entered the rooms as he had been directed to do, but who had found nothing to repay him for his trouble. But as Bolton had confessed, it was not necessary. The suit-case and the bag were found to contain all the stolen money with the exception of a little more than a hundred thousand dollars.

Before the prisoners were turned over to the proper authorities, Nick asked Hermia this question:

"I have heard you say over the telephone that you once knew me, through a sister of yours. I wish you would tell me who that sister was. I confess that I am curious to know."

For a moment she looked at him without replying. Then she said:

"Nick Carter, they can't keep me very long for what I have done in this case. When I get out of it I will make it my business to get even with you—and then I will tell you who my sister was."

THE END.

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How the Early Numbers of the TIP TOP WEEKLY May Be Secured

TO the boys who take interest in the adventures of Frank Merriwell and want to read everything that was written about him, we desire to say that numbers 1 to 325 of the **Tip Top Weekly** containing his early adventures are entirely out of stock and will not be reprinted. These numbers, however, were published in the Medal Library beginning with No. 150 which is entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays." We give herewith a complete list of all the Merriwell stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing.

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413—Frank Merriwell's Search.

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Second Grand Letter Competition

WE received so many hundreds of really excellent letters from readers of the **Rough Rider Weekly** in response to our first offer of gold dollars, that the Committee awarding the twenty leading prizes had considerable difficulty in carrying out their work; which, however, was finally done, the names printed, and the rewards sent forward. From time to time we shall print in our Chat Columns all these letters entering into the competition. And we also hope that every one who participated in the first contest will decide to take advantage of our second great offer. Tell us what, in your mind, a cracking good story of

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¶ The competition is open from April 1 until October 1, 1907, when the prizes will be awarded, full name and address of every winner being published in the **Rough Rider Weekly.**

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$10 in Gold for the Best Letter.

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¶ The letters should not be longer than 250 words and should be plainly addressed to "Manager of Rough Rider Letter Competition," care of Street & Smith. Now, boys, jump in and resolve to win a cash prize.

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